

GAMES

FAQ

Q I hear EA's new Battlefield multi-player first-person shooter will be free to download. Is this true?

A Yes, Battlefield 1942 revolutionised the online shooter back in 2002 with big maps, plenty of vehicles and support for up to 64 players. Sequels have successfully refined the formula again and again, but Battlefield Heroes will be the first shooter from a major publisher to be offered for free.

Details are thin on the ground at the moment, although EA has stated that the game will make money through a combination of advertising and micro-payments. The free download will probably consist of only a few maps, weapons and character classes, with additional content being drip-fed to the player at low prices.

The cartoon-style graphics are reminiscent of the recent Team Fortress 2, but gameplay will apparently stick to the classic Battlefield template. We imagine it will be insanely popular when released some time this summer on EA's new Play 4 Free label. More details are available from <http://battlefield-heroes.com>.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

seth@computershopper.co.uk

MIDWAY Unreal Tournament III

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

From www.play.com

The original Unreal Tournament is a cult classic, but while this latest instalment doesn't do anything particularly wrong, it suffers for being rather traditional when rivals such as Team Fortress 2, Crysis and Call of Duty 4 are busy trying something fresh.

The deal, as ever, is ludicrously big guns in a sci-fi setting, all rendered with a cutting-edge graphics engine. Bar a new feature here or a redesigned mode there, it's remarkably similar to its forerunners, and that's no bad thing. It's a classic formula, enjoyably over-the-top and free from unnecessary complexity.

The graphics engine is a technical marvel, and initially you'll do an occasional double-take as you struggle to believe that a game can look this real. Unreal Tournament III moves too fast for you to stand around admiring the view, though, which is probably just as well, as the art style leans towards bland and lacking in character. The extra detail in characters' faces and the surrounding architecture doesn't always stand out above the dreary brown and grey palette, while weapons are oversized, fussy and so laden with macho spiky bits that their purpose isn't always obvious.

As a pure deathmatch game, it's hard to criticise. It follows a classic formula that, although aged, is certainly not tired. This is what shooting a load of virtual warriors in a virtual arena should feel like: intuitive, fast and fluid. It piles on a



▲ Unreal Tournament III's drab red and brown scenery is rendered in incredible detail, but little else has changed since the last version

certain wonderful excess that its more restrained rivals lack. Its vehicles especially are delights of sci-fi madness. There's a robot scorpion, a frantically rolling bubble, a towering *War of the Worlds* tripod, an invisible mine-layer and more. It's in the vehicular combat that this game most develops a personality of its own.

Despite this, if you own an older version of Unreal Tournament, you'll probably be disappointed. It also relies heavily on quick reflexes rather than strategy, so you'll need plenty of practice to survive online, which can make it a frustrating experience for first-time players. There's a token single-player mode, best viewed as an extended tutorial, which pits you against AI-controlled 'bots' and gives you some practice before you venture online. If you're after a more tactical game, try Call of Duty 4; if you want something you can enjoy without a can of Red Bull to hand, try Team Fortress 2.

There's plenty of life in this old workhorse of a game yet, and it's good to revisit it in a flashier suit – it's just a shame it doesn't push the genre forward a little more.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Looks and feels great to play
- ✓ Runs smoothly even on older PCs
- ✗ No great innovations

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 64MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B0009RWH2A
DETAILS www.unrealtournament3.com

Top 5 games

1. The Orange Box

£27 inc VAT ★★★★★



This great-value omnibus contains the excellent Half-Life 2 plus Episodes 1 and 2. There's also a mind-bending puzzle game, Portal, and the stylish Team Fortress 2.

SUPPLIER www.game.co.uk DETAILS www.valvesoftware.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



2. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

£30 inc VAT ★★★★★



This first-person shooter's short campaign mode is intense and action packed, while the multiplayer mode grabs your attention with unlockable weapons and skills.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.charlieoscardelta.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



3. Crysis

£27 inc VAT ★★★★★



Crysis gives you plenty of choice in how to approach your enemy and how to defeat them. However, its stunning graphics will leave all but the most powerful PCs struggling.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.ea.com/crysis FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



4. BioShock

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



BioShock successfully blends first-person shooting with RPG-style character upgrades. It's set in an undersea city that's both terrible and beautiful to behold.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com FULL REVIEW Dec 2007



5. Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

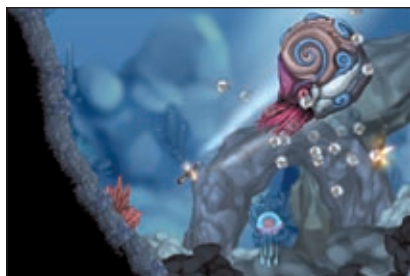
£12 + £9 a month inc VAT ★★★★★



This online role-playing game lets you immerse yourself in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The game's detail is truly stunning, it's easy to get into and the combat is excellent.

SUPPLIER www.asda-entertainment.co.uk DETAILS www.lotro.com FULL REVIEW Sep 2007





▲ Aquaria's kooky graphics and imaginative gameplay set it apart from the mainstream

BIT BLOT Aquaria

★★★

\$30 (around £16)
From www.bit-blot.com

Only available to buy online, developed on a tiny budget and untouched by a big publisher, Aquaria is one of an exciting new breed of independent games. As broadband access erodes the need to distribute games on discs, small development teams can make a living out of efforts considered too experimental to grace a shelf at Woolworth's.

Aquaria is an unusual prospect. It puts you in the flippers of an elfin underwater creature in search of the rest of her race. At first this involves exploring labyrinthine cave systems to progress to new areas, but on the way you'll encounter troublesome enemies and puzzles. You're unarmed to begin with, but over the course of the game you learn spells that transform you into new forms that can shoot energy beams, swim against opposing currents or pass through walls.

It may sound elaborate, but in practice it has a gentle learning curve as you gradually acquire new abilities and then use just a little brainpower to work out which one will resolve the next problem. For all Aquaria's creativity as a PC title, it has similarities to console classics such as Metroid and Ecco the Dolphin. It would be nice if it dished out a few more helpful pointers at times, but in general it's a pleasantly laid-back and forgiving game.

Aquaria's look is very much part of its appeal. The 2D graphics have a refreshing, hand-drawn feel that sets it apart from high-tech deathmatches. It's genuinely beautiful for the most part, although at times we felt as if we were watching a cartoon for pre-teen girls. The airy music and amateur-sounding voice-acting can grate a little, but the imaginative creature designs more than make up for it.

This is an inventive game, but it's relatively slight and perhaps a little overpriced at \$30. Still, if you're looking for a change of pace in your gaming, Aquaria is a great alternative to the usual rat-tat-tatting shooters.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Inventive and unusual
- ✓ Often very attractive
- ✗ Not very long

ACTION-ADVENTURE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.6GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 64MB graphics card, 200MB disk space
DETAILS www.bit-blot.com/aquaria



▲ Aliens attack small-town Nevada near the conspiracy theorists' beloved Area 51

MIDWAY Blacksite

★★★

£18 inc VAT
From www.game.co.uk

Blacksite's plot is based around the much-discussed Area 51 site in the Nevada desert. You play as Aeran Pierce, a Delta Force soldier who experiences some strange occurrences in Iraq that come to a head when aliens invade the small Nevadan town of Rachel.

The alien invasion forms the main body of the game, and although the plot is intriguing and the graphics impressive, you never have a sense of being fully submerged in this world. This is largely due to failings in the AI, both of your comrades and your enemies. Controlling your squad is designed to be simple, with a single-button approach that lets you assault doorways or attack specific enemies. However, they often carry out these commands awkwardly, remaining outside doorways and unable to engage their targets. Incoming enemies won't dive for cover in the realistic manner of foes from Call of Duty 4, either, and usually prefer to engage in a suicidal and tedious stand-up gunfight.

Another bone of contention is the lack of variety both in terms of weaponry and enemies. A few more opponents, with different attributes that require a different tactical approach, would have helped immensely. For example, you'll spend most of the game using your standard-issue assault rifle.

The game is a little over-concerned with ironic commentary about the American military, particularly in its dialogue. This is amusing at first, but it becomes grating in the latter stages and also acts to undermine your sense of immersion.

Blacksite is genuinely innovative in bringing a political slant to its storytelling, as it draws comparisons between American foreign policy and the alien invasion. But with the recent successes of Call of Duty 4 and Crysis, the first-person shooter genre is a tough place to compete, and Blacksite simply doesn't feel polished enough to deserve your attention.

Kevin Pocock

SUMMARY

- ✓ Interesting plot
- ✗ Poor AI
- ✗ Lacks variety

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 3GHz processor, 2GB RAM, 15GB disk space, 256MB DirectX 9.0c graphics card
PRODUCT CODE B000MFNT42 DETAILS www.blacksitegame.com



▲ Speedball may have gained better graphics since the Amiga days, but has it lost its spark?

FROGSTER INTERACTIVE Speedball 2 Tournament

★★★

£15 inc VAT
From www.play.com

This is a remake of the 1990 Amiga classic, Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe. Speedball is a fast and violent futuristic sport in which two teams of nine players try to outscore each other. Scoring goals is the most common method, but the arena is dotted with other opportunities, too. Players can pass the ball freely and attack other players at any time, making for hectic gameplay.

The original's single-button control has been expanded, and you can now jump, slide and sprint, as well as pass the ball and batter opponents. This increased complexity can be satisfying once you get the hang of it, but it detracts from the original's streamlined design. You'll need a joystick to enjoy it to its full, too.

The graphics have had a major overhaul from the original 2D sprites, but we're not keen on the robotic animations. The all-important slide move that once sent a player shooting across the screen with murderous intent is now a weak forward movement. There's a choice of arenas, but the differences are purely cosmetic.

Outside the matches, presentation is poor and the menus aren't designed to be navigated by joystick. Management options enable you to train your team and buy star players during a league season. There are also options for tactics during the game, with different formations and styles of play to select. You can play online, too, although you have to sign up at the game's website before competing.

Futuristic sports are now a largely forgotten gaming genre, which is perhaps not surprising now that developers can re-create actual sports such as football with such success. This game has neither the pick-up-and-play element of its predecessor, nor the slick design and depth of the latest football titles. As such it will appeal only to die-hard fans.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fast-paced gameplay
- ✗ Poor animation
- ✗ Presentation lacks polish

ACTION-ADVENTURE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 2GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.speedball2.com